

## Mid-Month Visit – June 2024

On 14 June 1900 the town of Potchefstroom was occupied by the British during the South African War (1899-1902). Hundreds of towns were occupied by the British during the war, so what was so special about Potchefstroom to deserve special mention? One must go back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War (1880-1881) to appreciate the significance of what transpired then, and what happened in 1900.



*Picture: The Old Fort Memorial, Potchefstroom*

At the outbreak of the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War, the Boers laid siege to the British Garrisons in the Transvaal – at Pretoria, Rustenburg, Potchefstroom, Lydenburg, Marabastadt, Standerton and Wakkerstroom. This all took place following 'defiance' of British rule over the Transvaal Republic since 1876 when Britain annexed the bankrupt Republic and reconstituted it as the South African Republic. However, after just over three years of British rule, the Boers wanted their independence back.

To quote from the book 'With the Boers in the Transvaal and Orange Free State (1880-1881)' by C.L. Norris-Newman (pages 98 & 99) – *"A Boer meeting was held on 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> of December, 1879, at which the people assembled together, for the third time hoisted the flag of the South African Republic and passed resolutions to the following effect: – That there being no hope of recovering their independence by peaceful means, the Volksraad should be convened, and a strong form of the South African Republic should be instituted – and the people swore to co-operate for that purpose and defend their rights until death."*

Several interesting events took place pre and post this meeting – the Bezuidenhout incident, the Bronkhorstspuit disaster, the battles leading up to Majuba, and then the Battle of Majuba, but those stories are not part of the scope of this newsletter.

Early in November 1880 the British confiscated a wagon belonging to a Burgher – Bezuidenhout – in lieu of unpaid taxes. A week later, a force of Boers forcefully reclaimed the wagon and returned it to Bezuidenhout. This prompted the British, at the main garrison in Pretoria, to send a British force to Potchefstroom to maintain law and order.

In mid-November a force was on its way from Pretoria. The book 'The Transvaal War (1880-1881)' by Lady Bellairs records (page 243) – *"The troops consisting of two 9-pounder guns of N Battery, 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Royal Artillery; two companies of the Royal Scots Fusiliers; a detachment of the*



*mounted troop of corps; a few men of the Commissariat and Army Hospital Corps – altogether, 10 officers and 203 men, at the commencement of hostilities, – had arrived at Potchefstroom, under Major Thornhill, R.A. Major Thornhill, however, being also in command of the Royal Artillery in South Africa, and required at headquarters – and as the Administrator declined to withdraw the troops from Potchefstroom – Lieutenant-Colonel Winsloe, of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, who had recently joined at Pretoria from England, was despatched to relieve him.”*



*Picture: Lieutenant-Colonel Winsloe*

The events of the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War are not part of the story, suffice to say that the war ended with the defeat of the British at the Battle of Majuba on 27 February 1881.

Due to the death at the battle of General Colley, the final 'peace' could not be negotiated, and General Sir Evelyn Wood was summoned from Pietermaritzburg. And to complicate matters, Wood had to involve the 'powers that be' in London. The 'Peace Treaty' was eventually signed by both parties on 23 March 1881 – 24 days after the British defeat at Majuba. During this time an armistice had been declared and communicated to all garrisons – other than Potchefstroom. Boer General Cronje was hell-bent on getting Lieutenant-Colonel Winsloe to surrender. Wagons with needed supplies were sent to all besieged garrisons, however, the wagons meant for Potchefstroom were delayed.

On 12 March 1881, the 87<sup>th</sup> day of the Siege of Potchefstroom, Paul Kruger, who was part of the Boer negotiators, sent a letter to Cronje which amongst other things stated – *"It is your duty to notify Major Winsloe of the agreement between Wood and Joubert (General Piet Joubert headed up the Boer negotiating party), but the armistice at Mooiriver (Potchefstroom) is not to commence prior to the arrival of supplies, and the handing over thereof to you. Before such time, be free to continue warfare ..."*

With supplies running low Winsloe called his officers together and told them that their stock of food could be stretched to last one more week. He suggested that negotiations to seek an honourable surrender should be made, while supplies still lasted, rather than wait until capitulation, without terms, was forced on them. All agreed to his proposal. He wrote a letter to Cronjé requesting a meeting. The meeting between the Colonel and General Cronjé was held in a tent between the fort and the town. After some discussion Lieutenants Rundle and Buskus were left behind to draw up the surrender document, which was finally amended the following day. The terms given to the garrison were generous, and on 21 March 1881 the garrison marched out of the fort with their homemade flag at the head. The siege had lasted 96 days.



In April 1881, Sir Evelyn Wood approached General Joubert and enquired why Cronjé had not informed Colonel Winsloe of the armistice agreement. This 'dishonourable action' led to the reoccupation of the fort in mid-June by General Redvers Buller V.C. and a force equal in size to the original garrison. Three days later they returned to Natal. This strange exercise was intended to indicate that the garrison's capitulation had been obtained by dishonourable means, and that it was cancelled.



Nineteen years later, with much pride and a certain amount of planning, the Royal Scots Fusiliers marched into Potchefstroom and hoisted their flag.

Justice done?

*Picture: The colours of the Royal Scots Fusiliers*

On one of the '1-Day Tours' offered by BattleToursZA, a visit is made to the Fort in Potchefstroom and the story of what happened in 1880-81 is re-told.

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**